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Author(s): Gar Alperovitz and Kai Bird

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# THE CENTRALITY OF THE BOMB

by Gar Alperovitz and Kai Bird

*"Russia and the United States [have] always gotten along for a hundred and fifty years history with Russia friendly and helpful. Our respective orbits do not clash geographically and I think on the whole we can probably keep out of clashes in the future."*

—Secretary of War Henry Stimson  
April 1945

✓ *"Before the atom bomb was used, I would have said, yes, I was sure we could keep the peace with Russia. Now I don't know....People are frightened and disturbed all over. Everyone feels insecure again."*

—General Dwight Eisenhower  
Visiting Moscow, August 1945

Even though the Cold War's abrupt, peaceful demise rendered useless most of the assumptions and theories advanced to explain that strange conflict, orthodox historians have kept on writing about it as if what actually happened had been inevitable. Moreover, they largely avoid the specific role the atomic bomb played in fueling the Cold War. In fact, the bomb was a primary catalyst of the Cold War, and, apart from the nuclear arms race, the most important specific role of nuclear weapons was to revolutionize American policy toward Germany. The bomb permitted U.S. leaders to do something no American president could otherwise have contemplated: rebuild and rearm the former

GAR ALPEROVITZ, author of *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam*, is president of the National Center for Economic Alternatives and a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies. KAI BIRD, author of *John J. McCloy: The Making of the American Establishment*, is currently a fellow at the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur foundation.

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Nazi state. That in turn had extraordinary, ongoing consequences.

The bomb also made the Korean and Vietnam wars possible: Had the weapon not been available to protect the U.S. global flank in Europe, such episodes would always have been “the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time,” to use General Omar Bradley’s words. Finally, those who believed early on that America and Russia could reach a great power accommodation were probably right—and such an accommodation may well have been delayed for four decades because the atomic bomb appeared precisely when America and the Soviet Union were beginning to feel their way to a new post-World War II relationship.

Not only does that explanation of the Cold War offer a good measure of common sense, but a vast body of new archival research lends powerful support to the hypothesis. This is not to say that frictions, rivalries, and areas of conflict would not have existed between the major powers had there been no atomic bomb. What needs to be explained is the extreme militarization of great power relations that came to be called “the Cold War.”

Historians like to see patterns, trends, and continuity in long periods of development, but they rarely pause to reflect upon the extreme chanciness of the timing of historically important events. Consider the prehistory of nuclear weapons. Physicist Hans Bethe once observed that it was only very “slowly and painfully, through a comedy of errors, [that] the fission of uranium was discovered.”

It was by mere chance, for instance, that Enrico Fermi made his critical 1934 discoveries about the capacity of the atom’s nucleus to capture slow neutrons. Fermi’s seemingly accidental findings built on a line of development that began with Albert Einstein’s famous 1905 papers and continued with subsequent reports and inventions by scientists such as Leo Szilard (in connection with the cyclotron) and James Chadwick (in connection with the existence of the neutron).

Most accounts do not acknowledge that had twentieth-century physics not been moving at the particular rate it did, America would never

have gotten to the 1939 Szilard-Einstein letter to President Franklin Roosevelt, the 1941 MAUD Committee report, and then the Manhattan Project—to a sufficiently advanced point, that is, where large sums of money and engineering expertise could have produced an atomic bomb by August 1945. As Bethe's remark suggests and others have noted, events might just as well have moved a decade or two slower or perhaps faster.

With that in mind, it is instructive to reflect on what might have happened (or, more precisely, what probably would not have happened) if the "independent track" of scientific historical development had not reached fruition in 1945. What might the postwar world have looked like in the absence of an early U.S. atomic monopoly?

#### *Germany and the Bomb*

At Yalta, Roosevelt had been quite clear about two fundamentals: First, given the domestic political concerns of a country taught to fear and hate Germany in the course of two world wars, he believed that the former Nazi state simply had to be eliminated as a serious security threat in the postwar period. It was both a strategic and an absolute political requirement. Second, as is well-known, Roosevelt felt that the American people would not permit him to keep American troops in Europe for long after the war. Given strong "isolationist" sentiments that appeared in Congress and the popular press, he was almost certainly correct in his judgment.

Those constraints produced the main requirements of Roosevelt's postwar security policy: He needed a rough agreement with the other dominant military power—the Soviet Union—to control Germany directly, and he needed a concrete way (beyond rhetoric) to weaken Germany's underlying military potential. Exaggerated discussions of "pastoralization" apart, Roosevelt's strategy centered on the notion of "industrial disarmament" to weaken Germany's military-industrial complex—and simultaneously to cement American-Soviet cooperation. Reductions in German industry could also provide the short-term

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reparations Joseph Stalin desperately sought to help rebuild the war-torn Soviet Union.

Related to that strategy, of course, were implications for Roosevelt's de facto acceptance of a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. To the extent Stalin was certain that Germany would not rise again, at least in theory Soviet policy could be more relaxed in Eastern Europe. The Yalta agreement embodied big-power control of Germany, large-scale reparations, and an extremely vague declaration on the status of Eastern Europe.

Yalta  
per A. Andover

Often overlooked is that from the American point of view, the advent of nuclear weapons gave Washington an alternative to constructing a European peace in cooperation with the Soviet Union. At Yalta, Washington had essentially agreed to a neutralized Germany, but with the bomb U.S. policymakers realized they could afford the risks of acting unilaterally. The western portion of Germany could safely be reconstructed economically and, later, integrated into a West European military alliance. Only the atomic monopoly permitted that with little fear of German resurgence and without regard to Soviet security interests.

At Potsdam, American leaders explicitly understood that the atomic test the United States had conducted at Alamogordo, New Mexico, had upended the assumptions of policy. Compare, for instance, the views of President Harry Truman's closest adviser, James Byrnes, before and after Alamogordo. On June 6, 1945, six weeks before the blast, the diary of Ambassador Joseph Davies records that Byrnes, about to become secretary of state, "discussed the entire Russian situation at great length":

We expected  
disarmament  
(so from the  
Russians, not  
from the US (West  
or East)  
anyway it is !)

Is that?

It was clear that without Russian cooperation, without a primary objective for Peace, another disastrous war would be inevitable....Nor did he think that our people on sober second thought would undertake fighting the Red Army and Russia for a hopeless cause of attempting to control the ideology or way of life which these various rival groups wished to establish in the various countries.

Although Russian cooperation was needed before the bomb, many scholars now recognize that the successful atomic test gave Truman "an entirely new feeling of confidence," as he

put it. It provided Secretary of State Byrnes in particular with what he called "a gun behind the door" that he believed could make Russia "more manageable." One of many similar conversations from the period was recorded by Secretary of War Stimson in his diary shortly after Hiroshima: "Byrnes was very much against any attempt to cooperate with Russia. His mind is full of his problems with the coming meeting of foreign ministers and he looks to having the presence of the bomb in his pocket, so to speak, as a great weapon to get through the thing."

In connection with the U.S. approach to Germany, the atomic bomb altered policy in two quite specific ways that went to the heart of Rooseveltian strategy. Shortly after the atomic test Byrnes simply abandoned the Yalta understanding that had set German reparations at roughly \$20 billion (half of which would go to the Soviet Union). Another Davies diary entry on July 28, 1945, shows that he did so explicitly relying on the atomic bomb: "[Byrnes] was having a hard time with reparations..., [but the] details as to the success of the atomic bomb, which he had just received, gave him confidence that the Soviets would agree as to these difficulties."

Moreover, according to Davies, the secretary of state was also quite clear about the shift in fundamental power relations in Europe: "Because of the New Mexico development [Byrnes] felt secure anyway." Byrnes suggested that "the New Mexico situation had given us great power, and that in the last analysis it would control." Several American policymakers (notably Benjamin Cohen, an assistant to Byrnes) had believed that international control of the Ruhr industrial heartland might be the key to a compromise approach. In principle, it could achieve security without necessarily weakening the German economic reconstruction effort. But—again, shortly after the report of the successful nuclear test—Byrnes rejected that proposal as well.

Many scholars now understand that the atomic bomb altered the Truman administration's general postwar approach to the USSR. What needs to be grasped is the specific im-

like:  
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Japan?  
Germany - or  
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A-bombs  
(or, without  
A-bombs?)  
or - world  
offer to Soviets  
be enough, as above or  
SU satisfied?

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lications the weapon had for the continuing U.S. approach to Germany. That there was a close link between the bomb and the German problem in the minds of U.S. policymakers was made quite explicit again, for instance, in two August 22, 1945, meetings with General Charles de Gaulle. Here Truman and Byrnes together urged that "the German danger should not be exaggerated." De Gaulle, however, continued to emphasize French fears—and, like Roosevelt's advisers and the Russians, urged direct security measures to manage the longer-term German threat (including international control of the Ruhr and severing the west bank of the Rhine from Germany). Finally, Truman and Byrnes—responding explicitly to de Gaulle's concern about Germany—became blunt: "The atomic bomb will give pause to countries which might [be] tempted to commit aggressions."

Although U.S. policymakers still worried about the potential power of a united German state, very early in the postwar period they clearly understood that Germany no longer presented a fundamental military threat. The new nuclear monopoly substantially relieved the Truman administration of the central foreign-policy and military concern of Roosevelt and his advisers. "In the last analysis it would control" as Byrnes said—even if the American people forced the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Continent, even if American-Soviet cooperation failed, and even if Germany were not disarmed industrially. Put another way, the bomb made it possible to pursue a policy described by scholars in recent years as "double containment"—that is, the division of Germany could be used to contain both the Germans and the Soviets.

✓ no  
Germany  
A-bomb.  
(function of  
NATO??  
US A-umbrella:  
no GERMAN  
BOMB.  
or alternative

SO: no Bomb  
Lew. Kennedy  
to US/NATO

### Scaring Stalin

The problem was obviously not quite the same from the Soviet point of view. In the first place, the new weapon itself now posed a threat. Generalized fear provoked by the new weapon was only one aspect of the problem: In the fall of 1945 and spring of 1946, American policy moved slowly but steadily away from Roosevelt's approach to Germany. Partly as a

result of French obstruction on the Allied Control Council, partly out of understandable fear of economic chaos and political disorder, and partly—but not at the outset—out of frustration with Soviet policy, U.S. policy shifted from industrial disarmament to rebuilding German economic power. A major turning point was probably the decision to stop reparation shipments in May 1946—dramatically followed by the tough speech Byrnes gave that September in Stuttgart.

That shift occurred at the same time that policymakers began to play up the bomb as a strategic factor. The U.S. stockpile of assembled weapons was actually quite small, but the potential of the nuclear monopoly was also obviously extraordinary—as was advertised by the atomic tests in June 1946 at Bikini Atoll in the Pacific. Code-named “Operation Crossroads,” the blasts took place at the same time Byrnes and Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov were again trying to reach agreement over Germany. *Pravda* took note of the mushroom cloud over Bikini and accused Washington of plotting an atomic war. And as the arsenal grew (50 weapons were available by 1948), the Truman administration steadily found the courage to act more forcefully and unilaterally in Germany.

Reams have been written about the extreme Russian security fears of the German threat. Stalin, in Nikita Khrushchev’s judgment, “lived in terror of an enemy attack.” The Soviet premier observed in April 1945 that Germany “will recover, and very quickly”—but apparently he initially believed that “quickly” meant as many as 10 or 15 years. Sometime at the end of 1947, as Michael McGwire observes in a recent study, “Stalin shifted focus...to the more immediate threat of war within 5–6 years against a capitalist coalition led by the Anglo-Saxon powers.”

Recently released Soviet documents offer additional insight. Soviet ambassador to the United States Nikolai Novikov, for instance, painted a deeply disturbing picture of American intentions toward the Soviet Union in 1946. Citing the U.S. “establishment of a system of naval and air bases stretching far beyond the

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boundaries of the United States" and the "creation of ever newer types of weapons," Novikov believed that Washington was preparing for war. In the heart of Europe, he

emphasized, America was "considering the possibility of terminating the Allied occupation of German territory before the main tasks of the occupation—the demilitarization and democratization of Germany—have been implemented. This would create the prerequisites for the revival of an imperialist Germany, which the United States plans to use in a future war on its side."

U.S. leaders fully understood Russian fears of Germany. Ambassador Averell Harriman, for instance, later recalled that "Stalin was afraid of Germany, Khrushchev was afraid of Germany, the present people [Brezhnev] are afraid of Germany—and I am afraid of Germany... [The Soviets] have a feeling that the Germans can arouse a situation which will involve us and that will lead to a disaster."

SARSON

**Those who believed early on that America and Russia could reach a great power accommodation were probably right.**

Obviously, the critical turning point came with the decision to partition Germany and rearm West Germany. American leaders recognized that the Soviets would view even the restoration of significant German economic power as a threat—and that this would have painful repercussions in Eastern Europe. At a cabinet meeting in late 1947, Secretary of State George Marshall predicted that because of U.S. actions in Germany the Soviets would have to "clamp down completely" on Czechoslovakia, and that when they did, it would be a "purely defensive move."

Was Marshall's basic insight into a critical dynamic feature of the early Cold War correct? Was Soviet policy in Central and Eastern Europe primarily defensive and a reaction to American policy toward Germany? It is difficult to know, of course, but others also recognized the point early on. In his opinion columns at the time, Walter Lippmann, for instance, regularly pointed out the obvious connection

between what happened in Germany and what happened in Eastern Europe. Unless the German problem were settled first, he urged, the Russians were unlikely ever to relax their hold on Eastern Europe. Lippmann believed that Byrnes's strategy of pressing forward on Eastern Europe without simultaneously promoting a reasonable settlement of the German issue was demanding too much. "We must not set up a German government in the two or three Western zones," Lippmann urged the Wall Street lawyer and future secretary of state John Foster Dulles in 1947. "We must not make a separate peace with it."

A steadily expanding body of research and documentary evidence suggests that Marshall's fundamental insight and Lippmann's early judgment offer the most plausible explanation for one of the most dramatic and painful features of the Cold War—Stalin's clampdown on Eastern Europe. The Soviet archives have yet to divulge anything definitive about Stalin's intentions at the end of World War II. However, even Harriman, who is usually portrayed as a hardliner in early postwar dealings with Moscow, thought the Soviet dictator had no firm plan at the outset: "I had a feeling," Harriman observed, "that they were considering and weighing the pros and cons of cooperating with us in the post-war world and getting the benefit of our cooperation in reconstruction."

Recent scholarship has uncovered far more indications of ambivalence—and, indeed, a great deal more caution and cooperation—in Soviet policy during 1945 and 1946 than is commonly recognized. A number of developments helped produce judgments about the Soviet Union like Harriman's:

- General elections in Hungary in the fall of 1945 held under Soviet supervision resulted in the defeat of communist-supported groups.
- In September 1945, Moscow unilaterally withdrew troops from Norway, despite its long-standing claims on Bear Island and Spitzbergen.
- In the wake of the December 1945 Moscow agreements, the government in Romania was enlarged to include noncommunists, after which both the United States and Great Britain

*Appendix*

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recognized it.

• The Soviet military also withdrew from Czechoslovakia at that time, and free elections produced a coalition government of communists and non-communists committed to keeping the country's doors open to both the East and the West.

• In the spring of 1946, Soviet troops left the Danish island of Bornholm.

• In accord with his "percentage agreement" with Winston Churchill, Stalin abandoned the Greek communists at a critical juncture in their civil war, leaving Greece within the Western sphere of influence.

• In Austria, the Soviet army supervised free elections in their occupation zone and, of course, withdrew after the signing of the Austrian Peace Treaty in 1955.

• The Soviets warned the French communist leader, Maurice Thorez, against attempting "to seize power by force since to do so would probably precipitate an international conflict from which the Soviet Union could hardly emerge victorious." (American intelligence obtained a report on that conversation in November 1946.)

• Despite a short delay, Soviet troops in 1946 did pull out of Iran—a country bordering the Soviet Union—after a brief and, in retrospect, rather modest international dispute.

• Perhaps most revealing, former Soviet officials who had defected to the West documented that important railway lines running from the Soviet Union through Eastern Europe were yanked up in the very early postwar period. The working assumption appeared to be that since there would be only a short occupation, Soviet forces should hurry to remove as much useful material as possible.

• Nor did Stalin pursue an aggressive policy in the Far East during the early years. Indeed, for a good period of time Stalin supported Nationalist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-shek—much to the lasting chagrin of Chinese communist leaders. And Red Army troops departed Manchuria in May 1946.

Many historians now accept that substantial evidence exists that Stalin neither planned nor desired the Cold War. Finland and Austria—

neutral but free states—serve as alternative models for border-area countries that the Soviet Union might have accepted had a different dynamic been established after World War II.

Of course, Soviet policy in Eastern Europe was to shift dramatically, especially after 1947 and 1948. Along with the announcement of the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan also appears to have been far more threatening to Stalin than was previously understood: It suggested the creation of a powerful “economic magnet” to draw Eastern Europe into the Western orbit. Once it was clear that Germany was to be rebuilt and later rearmed, the crackdown in Eastern Europe became irrevocable.

#### *Atomic Diplomacy talk to Dean Acheson*

That interpretation returns us to a central point, namely that the U.S. decision to rearm West Germany was made possible only by the atomic bomb. Modern writers often forget the degree of concern in the U.S. foreign policy establishment and elsewhere about the former Nazi state in the early postwar years. Even after the outbreak of the Korean War—and even with the atomic bomb—Truman’s high commissioner in Germany, John McCloy, initially opposed the creation of a German national army. So too did his successor, James Conant. And when they changed their minds, both men had to deal with the unrelenting opposition of the French. As late as August 1950, the State Department declared it “opposed, and still strongly opposes, the creation of German national forces.”

Further, Truman himself was deeply worried about the Germans—again, even with the bomb. Among many indications of Truman’s worry was a memo to Secretary of State Dean Acheson in June 1950:

We certainly don’t want to make the same mistake that was made after World War I when Germany was authorized to train one hundred thousand soldiers, principally for maintaining order locally in Germany. As you know, that hundred thousand was used for the basis of training the greatest war machine that ever came forth in European history.

Truman also recognized that he faced very powerful domestic political opposition to re-

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arming a nation that had so recently caused the deaths of so many American boys. "From today's perspective, the rearmament of Germany seems natural and almost inevitable," writes historian Frank Ninkovich in a recent study.

To achieve it, however, American policy makers had to clear a long series of hurdles, including self-doubts, widespread European reluctance, and Soviet obstructionism....The amazing thing, then, is not that rearmament took place with such enormous difficulty, but that it happened at all.

Amazing, indeed! All but unimaginable in the absence of nuclear weapons or popular support for maintaining major conventional forces. As Roosevelt had forecast, the American people overwhelmingly demanded rapid demobilization after the war. In June 1945, the United States had more than 12 million men and women under arms, but one year later the figure was only 3 million, and by June 1947 demobilization had left the armed services with no more than 1.5 million personnel. Congress defeated universal military training in 1947 and in 1948; defense spending in general declined rapidly during the first postwar years. Such domestic political realities left U.S. policymakers empty-handed: They did not have sufficient conventional forces to hold down the Germans.

Given such realities—and considering the extraordinary difficulty of achieving German rearmament even with U.S. possession of the atomic bomb—it is all but impossible to imagine the early rearmament of the former Nazi enemy had there been no atomic bomb. Put another way, had the scientific-technical track of development that yielded the knowledge required to make an atomic weapon not chanced to reach the point it had by 1939, the central weapon in America's postwar diplomatic arsenal would not have existed.

There is a further reason why we believe this hypothesis explains the early Cold War dynamic: German rearmament and the U.S. Cold War conventional buildup, many scholars recognize, probably could not have happened without the dramatic U.S. decision to enter the Korean War. That decision, in turn, was made possible only by the atomic bomb—and, hence, the train of subsequent events is difficult to

imagine in the absence of the bomb.

Even with the atomic bomb virtually every important American military leader was extremely skeptical about a land war in Asia. The Korean peninsula, of course, had been arbitrarily divided in 1945 by Moscow and Washington, and both powers were well aware that their client regimes in Pyongyang and Seoul were committed to unifying the country under their own flags. Each regime had guerrilla units operating in the other's territory in what amounted to a simmering civil war. (Washington was actually restricting the supply of offensive weapons to the Syngman Rhee regime in South Korea for fear that they would be used in an invasion of the North.)

By late 1949, as is well known, Truman's National Security Council (NSC) advisers had concluded that Korea was of little strategic value to the United States and that a commitment to use military force in Korea would be ill-advised. Early in 1950, both Acheson and the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Tom Connally, had publicly stated that South Korea lay outside the perimeter of U.S. national security interests.

Most important, to pledge troops to a land war in Asia would expose the American "European flank," since moving troops to Asia would weaken the American presence on the Continent. As General Bradley recounted in his memoirs, "We still believed our greatest potential for danger lay in Soviet aggression in Europe." And, "to risk widening the Korean War into a war with China would probably delight the Kremlin more than anything else we could do." The famous Bradley comment quoted earlier summarized the general view within the Joint Chiefs of Staff: Fighting in Korea would involve the United States "in the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy." When an invasion of the South did occur in June 1950, the Truman administration's decision to intervene amounted to an astonishing policy reversal.

If, even with the atomic bomb, U.S. military leaders hesitated to pledge land forces to the defense of Korea, then without the atomic

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Korea into  
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or front?)  
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Acheson

✓

## FOREIGN POLICY

bomb—which to the generals would have meant a totally exposed European "flank"—a decision to protect South Korea would have been practically impossible.

And again, very few would disagree with the proposition that the Korean War, in turn, provided a crucial fulcrum upon which the Cold War pivoted. Most scholars accept that NSC-68, the document outlining a massive rebuilding of the U.S. military, was going nowhere in early 1950; the defense budget was being cut, not raised. The political drama surrounding the Korean War permitted an extraordinary escalation both in Cold War hysteria and in military spending. Before Korea such spending was around 4 per cent of gross national product (GNP); during the war it peaked at nearly 14 per cent. After Korea it stabilized to average roughly 10 per cent of GNP during the 1950s—an unimaginable extravagance before that time. (The buildup, in turn, established a structure of forces and political attitudes without which the subsequent intervention in Vietnam is difficult to imagine.)

Most important, Germany almost certainly could only have been rearmed in the domestic political atmosphere that accompanied the chaotic Korean conflict, along with the qualitative political shift in Cold War tensions that the war brought. The entire scenario depended ultimately upon the odd historical timing that put nuclear weapons in American hands at a particular moment in the twentieth century.

### U.S. Overreaction?

What of “the Cold War” per se—the larger, overarching dynamic? Recall that the issue is not whether the usual tensions between great powers would or would not have existed. The issue is whether the relationship would have had to explode into the extremely militarized form it took.

Recently declassified archival materials from both sides should destroy the traditional assumption that the Soviet army at the end of World War II offensively threatened Western Europe. In 1945, roughly half the Soviet army's transport was horse-drawn, and it would remain so until 1950. Moreover, Soviet troops demobi-

NSC-68  
wanted—but  
without Korea  
can't get

the "loss of  
China"! 1949-50  
(despite A-bomb)  
+ the SO A-bomb!

Jesse L. Martin  
Chinese, etc

lized massively and dramatically in the early postwar period. Soviet documents suggest that Stalin's army shrank from 11,365,000 in May 1945 to 2,874,000 in June 1947.

W.B. 1.7M

While there is debate about how widely such information was known or heeded by top U.S. officials, a number of scholars have recently cited evidence suggesting that U.S. policy-makers fully understood that the Soviet Union had neither the intention nor the capability to launch a ground invasion of Western Europe. In December 1945, for instance, the State Department circulated an intelligence estimate concluding that for at least five years "the United States need not be acutely concerned about the current intentions of the Soviet Union [and has] considerable latitude in determining policy toward the USSR." A Joint Chiefs of Staff report at the end of 1948 estimated the Soviets might be able to marshal only some 800,000 troops for an attack force. Two years later, the CIA used the same figure in its intelligence estimate. Similarly, documents recapped in Frank Kofsky's recent *Harry S. Truman and the War Scare of 1948* provide devastating proof that American military intelligence estimates consistently concluded that the Soviets could not and did not want to wage war. One illustration is a high-level briefing given directly to Truman in late 1948:

The Russians have dismantled hundreds of miles of railroads in Germany and sent the rails and ties back to Russia. There remains, at the present time...only a single track railroad running Eastward out of the Berlin area and upon which the Russians must largely depend for their logistical support. This same railroad line changes from a standard gage going Eastward, to a Russian wide gage in Poland, which further complicates the problem of moving supplies and equipment forward.

W.B. next

George Kennan, for one, "never believed that they [the Soviets] have seen it as in their interests to overrun Western Europe militarily, or that they would have launched an attack on that region generally even if the so-called nuclear deterrent had not existed."

Credible documentation has also emerged from the Russian archives that Stalin repeatedly rejected North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung's requests for support of an invasion of South

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Korea. As one scholar, Kathryn Weathersby, has explained in a recent working paper, Stalin reluctantly "approved the plan only after having been assured that the United States would not intervene." Even then he apparently did so because Kim Il-Sung would otherwise have pursued the war anyway with support from the communist Chinese. As Weathersby concludes, "it was Soviet weakness that drove Stalin to support the attack on South Korea, not the unrestrained expansionism imagined by the authors of NSC-68."

Moreover, Bruce Cumings's sweeping, two-volume history, *The Origins of the Korean War*, demonstrates that the U.S. command in South Korea knew at the time that South Korean irregular army units had been provoking the North Koreans for months. A once clear-cut case of communist aggression is now seen by most knowledgeable historians as a complicated civil war that dated back at least to 1945.

**It is all but impossible to imagine the early rearmament of the former Nazi enemy had there been no atomic bomb.**

The Russian archives also show that often neither Stalin nor his successors could control the regimes in Eastern Europe, Cuba, China, North Korea, or North Vietnam. "It's a big myth that Moscow directed a unified monolith of socialist states," argues Deborah Kaple of Columbia University's Harriman Institute. Newly uncovered documents, for instance, make it clear that the Sino-Soviet split existed almost from the day Mao Tse-tung seized power. And other recent archival discoveries suggest that East Germany's Walter Ulbricht largely initiated the Berlin crisis of 1958–1961, forcing a reluctant Khrushchev to engage in brinkmanship diplomacy.

All of these events suggest a broadly defensive post-World War II Soviet foreign policy that on occasion accommodated American security interests. The monolithic enemy of Cold War fame, many now agree, existed mainly in the imaginations of America's ardent

anticommunist cold warriors. At the very least, these events suggest Stalin appeared willing to cut a deal with Washington in the critical early postwar years.

This analysis does not suggest that the American-Soviet relationships could have been a tranquil sea of cooperation. But the unusual and dangerous over-militarization of foreign policy during the Cold War demands an explanation on its own terms—and the atomic bomb is the first item in that lexicon.

This essay has not attempted to untangle the many factors that led to the end of the Cold War. One related issue, however, may be noted: The advent of nuclear weapons (and the U.S. nuclear monopoly in particular) upset the balance of power in general and especially in Europe, where from the Soviet point of view the critical issue was Germany. However, once the Soviet Union had its own nuclear weapons and a credible way to deliver them—and Germany had no such weapons—then the implicit balance of power in general and in Europe, too, was essentially restored, albeit at a higher level.

Before that time the Soviets kept Germany relatively weak by occupation, reparations, and tight control of the invasion routes. After the Soviet Union had secured nuclear weapons (and once the implications were digested and fought out by policy elites), Soviet policy could relax all three prongs of its earlier strategy. Old military and foreign policy *apparatchiks* did not easily abandon traditional assumptions, as the crackdown in Czechoslovakia in 1968 suggests. The preconditions for ending the Cold War, however, were established only after the basic power relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States was rebalanced.

Might history have taken a different course? Many high-level Western policymakers believed an accommodation with the Soviet Union was a reasonable possibility in the early postwar years. The United States was also in a position to encourage Soviet cooperation with the lure of desperately needed long-term economic aid. Indeed, had the United States lacked a nuclear weapons monopoly—and given the rapid pace of U.S. demobilization and Congress's rejection

1949-50? 55? 64?  
but why until  
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## FOREIGN POLICY

of universal military training—such an approach might well have been the only acceptable option from the U.S. point of view.

All of this, of course, is “counter-factual” history. As the late philosopher Morris Cohen observed in 1942, however, “we cannot grasp the full significance of what happened unless we have some idea of what the situation would have been otherwise.” But in a sense all history is implicitly counter-factual—including, above all, the counter-factual orthodox theory that had the United States not taken a tough stand after World War II, there would have been no “long peace” and disaster would inevitably have befallen the Continent, the world, and the United States.

In *A Preponderance of Power*, Melvyn Leffler concludes that because of its enormous strength the United States must also bear a preponderance of responsibility for the Cold War. That important judgment, like Stimson’s rejected 1945 plea for an immediate, direct, and private effort to cut short what became the nuclear era, brings into focus the question of just how wise were the “wise men” who crafted America’s Cold War policies at the moment when the two great tracks of twentieth-century scientific and global political development converged. At the very least, they failed to find a way to avoid one of history’s most costly and dangerous—indeed, literally world-threatening—struggles.

or now, again!

“but A-H → NATO”